
1993 California Statewide Followup Study Data Collection Methods

September 1994



Malcolm M. Lucas
Chief Justice

William C. Vickrey
Director

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF THE COURTS

California Statewide Office of Family Court Services

1993

**California Family Court Services
Statewide Followup Study**

Published by the Administrative
Office of the Courts

William C. Vickrey
Director

Dennis B. Jones
Chief Deputy Director

Kiri S. Torre
*Assistant Director
Court Services Division*

Isolina Ricci
*Statewide Coordinator
Family Court Services*

Charlene E. Depner, Ph.D.
*Coordinator for Research,
Evaluation, & Statistics*

Production of This Report

Marlene B. Simon
Field Coordinator

Susan Mather
Copy Editor

Suzanne Bean
Typesetter

For further information about the
California Family Court Services Snapshot Study, call (415) 396-9153

1993 California Statewide Followup Study

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The 1993 California Statewide Followup Study (hereafter called the 1993 Followup Study) is a longitudinal study of parents who used court-based mediation to attempt to work out child custody and visitation plans. The project is part of a program of research, the Uniform Statistical Reporting System, that fulfills the Statewide Office of Family Court Services' mandate to provide uniform statewide statistics that advise family law policy.¹ The program's mission is to provide rigorous statistics on issues facing policymakers, judges, attorneys, court personnel, researchers, special interest groups, and parents who use the family courts.

The Statewide Office employs a collaborative model in all of its research, identifying research questions in consultation with policy leaders and family court service providers and users across the state. Primary responsibility for the scientific merit, administration, and analysis of the findings rests with the Statewide Office.

The 1991 Snapshot Study²¹ was the first large-scale statewide data collection from a representative sample of parents using family court services. That study provided reliable statistics about family court service users throughout California and, for those participating in child custody mediation, their current experiences in the court. However, the study could not address questions about longer-term outcomes for families.

The Followup Study was designed to track and re-interview parents a year or so after the mediation session covered in the Snapshot Study. By the end of that session, some parents had agreed on a parenting plan for their children, some would continue mediating, and some would proceed to a court hearing for a decision on custody and visitation. The Followup Study sheds light on what happened next: How did those parents ultimately form their parenting plans? How have they deviated from those plans? Have they returned to family court? What are their current relationships with their children? How have the parenting plans worked out for the children? Looking back, how do the parents evaluate their experience in family court?

¹Under Family Code sections 1850-52, the California Statewide Office of Family Court Services is mandated to (1) assist counties in implementing mediation and conciliation proceedings; (2) administer a program of grants for research, study, and demonstration projects in the area of family law; (3) administer a program for the training of court personnel involved in family law proceedings; (4) establish and implement a uniform statistical reporting system; and (5) conduct research on the effectiveness of current family law for the purpose of shaping future public policy.

²A full description of the content, design, and methodology of the study can be found in California Family Court Services Snapshot Study: Data Collection Methods (1994). Statewide Office of Family Court Services, Administrative Office of the Courts, San Francisco, CA. For an overview of the results of the study, see Report 1: Families, Cases, and Client Feedback (1992). Statewide Office of Family Court Services, Administrative Office of the Courts, San Francisco, CA.

Study Design and Content

The 1991 Snapshot Study attempted to collect data about every session held in family court services offices throughout the state during a specified time period. Most of the family court services sessions (1,388 out of 1,699) were child custody and mediation sessions. Only mediation clients were re-interviewed in the Followup Study.

At the time of the 1991 Snapshot Study, mediation clients were asked to give their permission for the Statewide Office to contact them in the future. The 2,274 parents (84 percent of mediating parents) who were willing to be re-contacted filled out a form providing information that would help locate them in the future.³

The Snapshot Study used self-administered questionnaires, which were filled out while the clients were in the family court services offices. The Followup Study was a multi-method, multi-stage study. The data collection method used in the first stage was a mail survey. After all respondents who could be located by mail were reached, the second stage telephone survey was implemented. Spanish language self-administered questionnaires were provided for the Snapshot Study and the Followup Study mail survey, and Spanish-speaking interviewers were available for the Followup Study telephone survey.

Data Collection

The mail survey was conducted by the Statewide Office with a field period lasting from June through November 1992. The Social Science Research Center of California State University--Fullerton was selected to conduct the second stage of the Followup Study, a telephone survey. The data collection period for the telephone survey was May through November 1993.

Stage 1--Mail Survey

•*Locating Respondents by Mail*

Locating those parents who were no longer at the addresses provided at the time of the 1991 Snapshot Study was an intensive and extensive process involving cycles of mailings continuing throughout the mail survey's field period.

The process of updating the address data base consisting of the 1991 Snapshot Study mediation clients began some months before the actual data collection period. In March 1992, a letter of thanks enclosed with a brief report and a postage-paid, self-addressed return postcard was sent to every parent who provided address information. All mailings used envelopes printed "Address Correction Requested" so that the postal service would return the envelopes to the Statewide Office instead of forwarding mail to moved respondents. The envelopes returned by the postal service and the postcards returned by

³Ethical guidelines for the protection of human subjects have been followed in every stage of the research. Every effort has been made to protect the privacy of the study participants.

respondents were used to update the address data base. The mail search continued throughout the field period (June-November 1992) since respondents continued to relocate.

The most frequent source of new addresses was the "Address Correction Requested" service. For those without forwarding addresses, a search was made through the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). Those respondents whose address could not be found became part of the second stage telephone survey.

- *Mail Survey*

Mailing procedures generally accepted in the research community⁴ were used in conducting the Followup Mail Survey. The first mailing consisted of a letter using the respondent's name, a copy of the questionnaire, and a postage-paid, self-addressed envelope. The second mailing, a brief reminder letter addressed to "Dear Parent," was sent one week later. After a wait of two more weeks, a third mailing was sent to those parents who had not returned questionnaires and whose envelopes had not been returned. The third mailing included another personalized letter, a duplicate copy of the questionnaire, and a postage-paid, self-addressed envelope. The last mailing was sent two weeks later, a total of five weeks after the initial mailing. The final mailing included a personalized letter asking for the respondent's help in making the survey as complete as possible, and another duplicate questionnaire and return envelope.

Completed questionnaires were returned by 931 parents in the mail survey phase. By the end of stage 1, every new address that could be obtained through the postal service and DMV had been documented. Out of the 2,274 parents who had provided re-contact information, a group of 1,313 parents remained who might still be located and interviewed by telephone.

Stage 2--Telephone Survey

- *Locating Respondents by Telephone*

The address data base of the parents still to be located and interviewed was transferred to the Social Science Research Center for an extensive telephone search. The search efforts were initiated in April 1993, and continued throughout the duration of the telephone survey. The Center began by calling any home and work numbers provided, then seeking out current phone numbers, and finally calling the references listed for those respondents whose phone numbers could not be found. Multiple attempts were made to reach references and the respondents. The number of telephone calls per individual made in the effort to contact 1991 Snapshot Study respondents ranged from 1 to 131. The median number of calls made for those cases where the respondent was reached and successfully interviewed was 9; the median number of calls for the non-completes was 12.

⁴See Dillman, Don A., *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method* (1978) Wiley, New York.

•*Telephone Survey*

The mail questionnaire was adapted to a Computer Assisted Telephone Instrument, making every attempt to keep the wording identical and presentation of the questions to the respondent as similar as possible. The telephone interviewers were experienced and trained to follow the questionnaire exactly.

An additional 601 parents were interviewed by telephone.

Content

The Followup Study questionnaire repeated selected items from the 1991 Snapshot Study instruments and added items to assess participants' current situations and their evaluations. For those parents who reached their parenting agreements in court-connected mediation, the replicated evaluation items allowed an examination of satisfaction or dissatisfaction over time. Other replicated items provided updates on parenting plans, children's time distribution, and current economic situations. Items to assess parents' current relationships with their children and their co-parenting experiences were added. Chart 1, below, summarizes the questionnaire's content.

CHART 1
California Statewide Followup Study
Questionnaire Content

Method of reaching parenting agreement
Demographic profile of parent and children
Service helpfulness
Satisfaction with service
Custody disposition
Satisfaction with agreement
Current parenting arrangements
Relitigation
Interparental relationship
Relationships with children
Suggestions for improvement of service

Coverage and Representativeness

The Followup Study provides the best longitudinal statewide data about families who have used court-based child custody mediation. Until the 1991 Snapshot Study, the only studies of court-based mediation in California had been with convenience samples, regional populations, or confined to individual superior courts. Those kinds of studies provided a valuable exploration of the issues, but were too limited in scope to provide evaluative data, or data on the prevailing experience of parents using family court services. Similarly, the few longitudinal studies conducted on families who had used court-based child custody mediation were not statewide studies. The Followup Study data, representing a view of a statewide sample over time, fill an important knowledge gap.

The 1991 Snapshot Study⁵ collected information about 82 percent of all court-based mediation sessions that took place throughout the state of California during the study period; a large enough proportion to provide representative data about court mediation in California. (See Chart 2.) Eighty-four percent (2,274) of the parents participating in the Snapshot Study mediation sessions consented to future contact. The Followup Study succeeded in locating 84 percent (1,921) of those mothers and fathers. Eighty percent of those located agreed to be re-interviewed (1,532); 931 completed and returned a self-administered questionnaire; 601 were interviewed by telephone. In the 1991 Snapshot Study, only 79 parents participated using a Spanish-language questionnaire, representing 3 percent of those who filled out a questionnaire. In the Followup Study, again, about 3 percent responded in Spanish; 29 parents filled out a Spanish questionnaire and 15 were interviewed on the telephone in Spanish.

⁵California Family Court Services Snapshot Study: Data Collection Methods (1994), Ibid.

CHART 2
California Statewide Followup Study of 1991 Snapshot Study Respondents

Total Mediation Sessions Conducted During Snapshot Study Period	1,697
Mediation Sessions Included in Snapshot Study (Each session represents one family)	1,388
(Percent of total mediation sessions included in study)	82 %
Parents In Mediation Sessions Included in Snapshot Study⁶	2,708
Parents Consenting to Followup	2,274
(Percent of parents in mediation sessions included in Snapshot Study)	84%
Number of parents ineligible--deceased/reconciled	56
(Percent of consenting parents)	2%
Number of parents located for Followup	1,921
(Percent of consenting parents)	84%
Number located who refused	175
(Percent of located parents)	9%
Number located but not interviewed for other reasons	181
(Percent of located parents)	9%
Parents Interviewed in Followup	1,532
(Percent of located parents)	80%
Mail Questionnaire	931
Telephone Interview	601
Number of Families Represented in Followup	1,069
(Percent of Families from Snapshot Study)	77%

The major concern to be considered in interpreting the result, is the sample attrition, i.e., the number of respondents lost between the Snapshot and Followup Studies. To obtain some picture of how the Followup Study's sample attrition might bias the findings, a comparison was made of Followup Study respondents versus nonrespondents using 1991 Snapshot Study data.

- No differences were found between those who did and did not fill out an address form. This would indicate no systematic bias stemming from whether or not permission for followup was given by parents.
- Custody arrangements and the kind of time allocation agreements made at the time of the 1991 Snapshot Study had no impact on whether or not the parents participated in the Followup Study.
- The parent's reported satisfaction with mediation was the same for respondents and nonrespondents to the Followup Study.

⁶Based on Counselor's Report.

- There were significant demographic differences between Followup Study respondents and nonrespondents. Followup respondents were, on the whole, more likely to be:
 - ⇒ women (54 percent of the respondents as opposed to 46 percent of the nonrespondents),
 - ⇒ older (47 percent of respondents and 41 percent of the nonrespondents were 35-49 years old),
 - ⇒ better educated (23 percent of the respondents and 15 percent of the nonrespondents have a college or graduate degree),
 - ⇒ higher income (average monthly income was \$1,389 for respondents and \$1,221 for nonrespondents),
 - ⇒ employed (76 percent of respondents and 67 percent of nonrespondents), and
 - ⇒ white (67 percent of respondents and 58 percent of nonrespondents).
- Those in the Snapshot Study who reported never having a Domestic Violence Temporary Restraining Order (TRO) were more likely to have been re-interviewed in the Followup Study (44 percent of the Followup respondents and 36 percent of the nonrespondents never had a TRO).

The differences between respondents and nonrespondents are relatively few. There are no differences on such important measures as custody and visitation arrangements and client reports of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with mediation. However, the differences in the demographic variables and the TRO variable should be factored in when interpreting the data and drawing conclusions.

Despite these cautions, the data offer an unprecedented opportunity to examine the long-term impact of child custody mediation and to gain some insight into how families adapt in the years after they are seen in family court.
